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ABSTRACT

Among the goals of the teacher of human development is to open students' minds to the diverse cultural and ethnic influences that effect the development of children. A new approach to a semester-long human development course offered at Green Mountain College, in Vermont, is based on the study of children's literature. The course is organized around a historical theme, looking at how society has viewed and treated children through the ages, and across cultures. Within this context, the course examines the development of the child from conception to puberty. Initiation into the multicultural world begins with readings from 17th and 18th century American literature. The first works, by Puritans, reveal a world in which children are to be seen and not heard, are looked upon as inherently evil, and are not supposed to have fun. Readings from 19th century literature tend to portray children as playful, joyous, and mischievous, presaging the "modern child." The more contemporary children's literature lends itself well to the study of stages and areas of child development, while heightening students' awareness of the family of today, which often consists of a single parent, other-than-parent caregivers, and the growing number of gay and lesbian couples with children. The course also explores variations of traditional folk tales from different cultures, allowing for the examination of distinct mores and views of the self. Throughout the course, the question, "Who is this child?" is addressed, revealing significant differences and similarities both within and between cultures. Bibliographies of children's and human development literature are provided. (MAB)

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WHO IS THIS CHILD?

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN A HUMAN DEVELOPMENT CLASS

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Everyone has a theory about children. Each of us thinks she knows a great deal about their development. Our students are no different from us in this area. How difficult could the study of child psychology be when it's only about kids? What could I possibly learn that I don't already know? After all, I've been a kid.

Attitudes like those just mentioned and the fact that multiple sections of Human Development 1 (Child Psychology) are taught every year are sufficient motivation to change the framework for the course on a regular basis. It would obviously create a deadly situation if the teacher were bored with the material and if the students came to the course with minds closed by pseudo-knowledge.

In addition to the subject matter of each course we teach, it is important to be concerned about other issues, such as: students' reading and writing ability and the lack of same, the invalid assumption that the white, American middle class way of "raising" children is the only way and the sense that children are miniature adults and as such are incomplete, incorrect and need to be straightened out.

Many of us have had the experience of having students describe themselves as non-readers, and having them

frequently express difficulty with reading assignments for class. As for outside reading for enrichment or pleasure - there doesn't seem to be a lot of that going around.

A few years ago, a mini-project was initiated within the context of the Human Development class to address students' lack of contact with books. Children's literature was introduced not only as a means of understanding children, but also as a way of renewing contact with books which, it was assumed, had provided moments of joy and enrichment during childhood. Many students said that the project made them want to read more. Some even acknowledged that re-reading these books provided them with their first pleasure reading since the last contact with such literature. Judy Blume, Beatrix Potter, Frank Dixon, and Beverly Cleary helped students to realize that reading IS good, and that they ARE NOT non-readers. In their evaluations of the course, students clearly demonstrated that the literature segment had had a profound effect on them as students of development and as readers and learners.

Among the goals of the teacher of human development is the opening of students' minds to the diversity of cultural and ethnic influences which impact the development of children. In past semesters, the study of cross cultural research had provided opportunities for expanding our customary ethnocentric viewpoint. In addition, students had been encouraged to keep up with current events and articles

in the daily press which addressed issues about children from a variety of backgrounds. It seemed that children's literature would be a wonderful resource in this area, since so many authors of children's books had chosen to address the issue of diversity in recent years.

In 1991, the Assistant Librarian and the Human Development teacher decided to collaborate on an expanded project which would be integrated with the course material and which would offer a new framework for the subject matter. The Assistant Librarian began working on the development of a bibliography and the Professor worked on the subject matter of the course. The integration of the course materials and the literature was a collaborative effort.

At the outset, the course was organized around an historical theme. Cleverly and Phillips' (1986) Visions of Childhood provided a framework for looking at how society has viewed and treated children through the ages and across cultural domains. With this as a background, the study of the child was followed developmentally, from conception to puberty. An attempt was made to provide students with readings in the literature for the young which would follow these themes and reinforce the learning that was taking place.

The intent was to bring vitality to the subject matter, to make learning about children as exciting an experience as childhood itself. The bonus was that the semester-long

experience would open the class participants' ethnocentric eyes. Children's literature was the vehicle : what better way to discover children than through the literature written for and about them?

In keeping with the historical organization of the beginning of the course, initiation into the multicultural world began with readings from 17th and 18th century American children's literature. The New England Primer was the main course in the intellectual nourishment of young colonists (Ford, 1899). While the date of the particular edition studied by the class is 1899, the Primer existed in many variations for approximately two centuries, the first edition dating back to somewhere around 1680. This "lesson book" featured typical sections, such as an alphabet, but had a particularly Puritan bent; there were often rhyming prayers and condensed Bible history stories to be memorized.

James Janeway, who wrote A Token for Children in 1672, portrayed even more terrifying versions of childhood in Colonial America. After hearing a sermon promising destruction to hardened hearts, eight-year-old Sarah Howley (one of the protagonists),

> spent a great part of the night in weeping and praying... desiring with all her soul to escape from everlasting flames, and to get an interest in the Lord Jesus (Demers, 1982, p.45).

These and other selections showed a world in which children were to be seen and not heard, were looked upon as inherently

evil, and did not know the meaning of the word fun. To the students in the Human Development class, the children in these writings may as well have been from another planet! It was difficult for the class to understand the mores of American society 250 years ago.

The observation of a past society's very narrow view of children helped to make the class aware of the narrowness of the present-day view-point. How does the modern world really see children? In the present age are children seen as endangered, disabled, or prone to evil, as needing to be molded, as parental investments in the future, as inconvenient, as financial and social drains on the parenting couple? Are these misperceptions of children today just as constraining as those of past ages? These questions led to lively discussions of "Who IS this child?".

As the Puritan age passed into history, so did the puritanical vision of childhood. The 19th century ushered in the beginnings of what is understood to be the modern child. Palmer Cox's (1887) series of stories about the mischievous Brownies introduce the world of imaginary beings and the legitimacy of play. The Brownies are described as "imaginary little sprites, who are supposed to delight in harmless pranks and helpful deeds" (p. vii). So, in their character description, they already symbolize playfulness.

The story of "The Brownies at School" links the new idea of children as playful, joyous, and mischievous with the

Puritan work (and learn) ethic. Rhymes and illustrations show both the children who come to write and read, and those who spend their time poking their neighbors and pulling pigtails. One of the closing stanzas aptly connects the two concepts:

> "...taken up was every mind
> with fun and study well combined..."
> (Cox, 1887, p. 5).

The role of play in the physical and social development of the child was appropriately dealt with as the class became aware of this new attitude towards children. Students noted that young children do not seem to have the arbitrary categories of work and play that adults have. Play is the child's work. The implications of this for peer and parental relationships, and for the development of the child's self esteem are clarified in Bruno Bettelheim's (1985) A Good Enough Parent and Monighan-Nourot, Scales, Van Hoorn, and Almy's (1987) Looking at Children's Play.

Other authors who combine the ideas of fun and learning are those mentioned in Demers' and Moyles' (1982) book From Instruction to Delight. The chapter entitled "Harbingers of the Golden Age" has excerpts from many contemporaries with not-surprisingly similar views of children. Ann Gilbert's poem about Meddlesome Matty and excerpts from Heinrich Hoffmann's (1848) The English Struwwelpeter; or, Pretty Stories and Funny Pictures for Little Children show children as naughty, but with redeeming qualities. Instead of the black and white picture painted by the Puritans, children are

portrayed in multiple colors, or at least in several shades of gray.

The characters in the literature of the 1800's reflect experiences similar to those of the present time. Children were allowed time for play, and could be mischievous without being damned to an eternity in Hell. It seemed to the college students that people with similar beliefs and experiences are easier to like and accept than people whose ideas differ from their own. It was exactly this narrow perspective which was being addressed in the course.

The more contemporary children's literature seemed to lend itself well to the study of stages and areas of child development. The Newsweek (1990) Special Edition on "The 21st Century Family," exposed the class to the new and exciting discoveries in the field of infertility, which have made it possible for couples to have babies for whom this would have been an impossibility years ago. In addition, it heightened students' awareness of the family of today which often consists of a single parent, other-than-parent caregivers, and the growing number of gay and lesbian couples who are adopting and, in some cases, having children. These and other factors of contemporary society led to the use of the word "caregivers" rather than "parents" in most contexts. It became more and more obvious that the essential qualities of caregivers superseded race, gender, ethnicity and economics.

One of the class' favorite books was "More, More, More,"

Said the Baby, which focuses on emotional development (Williams, 1990). Vignettes from different households each present an adult and a child in bonding activities. A Caucasian pair, a racially-mixed pair, and an Asian pair showed that the love between caregiver and child is an emotion that all humans experience, regardless of ethnic or other differences. The basic nature of childhood transcends these boundaries.

The question "Who is this child?" is answered each time we pick up a book written for children. Is the child born sinful? The Puritans and Wesley thought so. Is the child born pure and good? Rousseau and Neill would agree. That the child is a developing individual and not a miniature adult is clear from the books which truly appeal to children. From the silly rhymes of Dr. Seuss to the fantasies of Tolkien, the child's world is qualitatively different from that of the adult.

Piaget developed his stage theory by observing children, asking them questions and listening to their answers. The child who in his egocentrism believes that the moon follows him at night relates well to the book Goodnight Moon. The child who manifests animism in wrapping a doll in a blanket so that it will not be cold, is delighted by the adventures in Corduroy or A Bear Called Paddington. These concepts of child development became clearer to the college students as they saw examples in the literature.

The social and emotional development of the child is clearly enhanced by exposure to literature. The developing child can begin to show distress at the difficulty of a character in a book. In Henry and Mudge (1990), children are aware of the sadness of both the little boy Henry and his dog Mudge, when Mudge becomes lost in the country. Her problem solving techniques can be enhanced by books like Changes, Changes (1971), which tell of the resolution of problems. In this case, the characters create a home out of building blocks, turn it into a fire engine when it begins to burn, and continue to build their way out of their predicaments.

Language development - from 50 to about 8,000 words during the preschool years - is certainly enhanced by contact with stories which improve vocabulary and word knowledge. Word recognition is aided by illustrations such as those in Polar Express, or by photographs, such as Shadows and Reflections. In discussing the development of children's language, the college students could see the importance of exposure to the spoken word - to the ordinary every day word and the wonderful words of these books - which even seemed to talk the way that children did. From picture books like Anno's Alphabet, and easy readers such as Go, Dog, Go!, to works of medium difficulty like Max's Chocolate Chicken, and complex mysteries such as The Eleventh Hour, students became aware of the unfolding of the child's language potential.

Other aspects of cognitive and social development can be

taught from diverse perspectives. Baby's World is a picture catalog of items used by babies and young children on a daily basis (Shott 1990). The infants pictured are racially diverse, but the universality of the objects connects all of the children. Monfried's (1990) Daddies Boat speaks to changing parental roles. The "daddy" in this story stays at home and serves as primary caregiver, while the "mommy" works all week and takes the "daddies boat" home to join her family on weekends. Books like Spot's First Words introduce basic concepts using a protagonist quite unlike the human reading the book.

A study of traditional folk tales provided a look at cultural differences from another perspective. The class participants examined an American version of Little Red Riding Hood (Hyman, 1983) and a Chinese version of the same story called Lon Po Po (Young, 1989). The plot and characters in the two versions were similar, but with a few important twists. In the Chinese version, there are three children, and the mother is the character who goes to visit the sick Grandmother (Po Po). The wolf discovers very quickly what is happening, and disguises himself as the grandmother who has come to visit her three grandchildren. The "questioning" of the grandmother about her ears, teeth, and other physical features is nearly the same.

The most striking contrast, however, is in the presentation of the moral of the story. The struggle between

good and evil is very much an individual one in the American tale. In the Chinese version, the problem is resolved through community effort. Who is this child? Is she an individual, or a member of a community, or does each perspective contribute something valid to the total picture?

The influence of cultural, familial, and educational background became the basis for discussion of the many social issues of the day which affect children, such as: genetic engineering, abortion, education, day care, and gender differences in social and academic achievement, among others.

Diversity does not limit itself to culture. It is apparent in every facet of people's lives. The Big Book For Peace (Durrell, 1990), a collaborative effort by writers and illustrators of children's literature, presents examples of some of these other facets. In this particular work, the individual stories are linked together by the theme of peace.

Economic diversity is dealt with subtly in "Tree House" by Lois Lowry. Chrissy, the African American protagonist, has a tree house built by her grandfather. The wood is new from the lumberyard, has a fresh coat of paint, and a rug and a brass doorbell are purchased as special adornments. Most significant, however, is the sign for the front door: CHRISSY'S HOUSE, KEEP OUT!

Leah, the Caucasian protagonist and Chrissy's friend, is not allowed in the tree house, and has her father build one of her own. Leah's father is at home because he lost his

job. There is no extra money for paint and brass trimmings. But Leah has pictures of beautiful women from her mother's salon and a bowl of fresh fruit. And a sign that says: LEAH'S HOUSE, KEEP OUT!

The girls discover the meaning of loneliness and resolve their differences by building a physical bridge between the two tree houses that serves as a symbolic bridge between the two girls and their particular economic, ethnic, and emotional frames of reference. Readers are exposed to the value of cooperation, interpersonal skills, and the possibility that the differences between people are as important to accept as the similarities.

Looking back, the incorporation of diversity into the Human Development classroom was beneficial both to students and to teachers. The focus on children's literature brought many examples of diversity to the foreground, from readings dating back to Colonial America, to traditional folk tales, to 20th century works. The class became aware of both the continuity of certain societal issues across time within cultures, and across different cultures. They also witnessed the differences that exist both within and between cultures. It seemed that studying human development through children's literature opened the participants' eyes to the many ways in which children have been and are now being viewed.

Who is this child? Perhaps we do not have the complete

answer yet, but at least we have come to realize how much we do not know and how narrow a viewpoint we have had in the past.

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